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ABSTRACT

"Politically correct" is a pejorative label applied to activities that in some way question, subvert, or threaten the dominant power structure. In discussing how best to educate students, some composition professionals assume that the composition classroom can be made apolitical. Freshman English, like all classes, is politicized already, and its political assumptions should be made overt. Teaching becomes indoctrination unless the assumptions behind a discipline are exposed and discussed. An alternative to the overtly political classroom can be called the ethical epistemic approach to teaching. The approach assumes that: (1) composition is a study of written language use; (2) content is more important than form in producing intelligent, interesting papers; and (3) texts, including freshman essays, participate in and express the views of the dominant cultural system. In this new approach, the freshman composition classroom is run as an ongoing writing workshop. During the semester, students write essays on whatever topics they choose and evaluate each other's work. Students are encouraged to question research sources and their writing for underlying ideologies hidden in familiar, rarely-questioned concepts. The ethical epistemic approach seeks to achieve a balance between indoctrination and the pretense of depoliticization while still promoting writing skills. (SG)

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Balancing Politically Charged Social Issues in Freshman Composition: The Ethical Epistemic Approach

I read an interesting definition of "politically correct" the other day. In an editorial for *USA Today*, Michael Gartner, president of NBC News, associates politically correct thinking with "pulling punches with the truth, [and] omitting relevant facts...and views," and he implies that proponents of politically correct thinking are "thought police who want society to conform to their view of right and wrong" (11A). I bring this up because I believe Gartner has put his thumb on the popular notion of political correctness. I imagine he could have been more thorough by mentioning how these thought police want to eliminate the first amendment right of free speech, but he did talk about the "speech codes on campuses," so I think he covered the issue succinctly and in its entirety. I have one question, though: Who are these people who want to do all these terrible things? Omitting relevant facts? Pulling punches with the truth? At first glance, I thought I was reading about the Bush administration.

The use of this term "politically correct" obfuscates a number of important issues, but primary among them is the groups who have been labeled "politically correct." Through all my research, I could not find any person or organization who identified him or herself or their group or their teaching method as "politically correct." The fact is that

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"politically correct" is not a self-describing term, but a pejorative, sarcastic label that has been slapped onto any type of teaching method, news reporting, or social activity that questions, subverts, or threatens the dominant power structure. The terminology is just another way of marginalizing those who are working towards political change.

However, in our field, the debate over political correctness has revealed concerns about pedagogy, course syllabi, and political neutrality in the classroom. I listened at last year's CCCC to a Thursday afternoon "Think Tank" involving the University of Texas at Austin's required writing course. I was under the impression that politically speaking, the panelists were not divided at all. None of them, in other words, wanted to promote racism or sexism, and I'm sure they are all quite critical of the trend our country has taken towards anti-intellectualism and neo-conservatism. Their argument centered around how best to educate students--about the purpose of a freshman writing course--not about the validity of political interpretations.

The assumption behind their argument, though, is that there is a way of making a classroom apolitical. Maxine Hairston, for instance, one of the panelists, has written that "politicizing freshman English is not the solution to social ills, either on campus or in society" (B1). I disagree because I feel freshman English, like all classes, is already politicized, and due to its political bent, is part of the cause of social ills. In its traditional form, freshman English espouses a foundationalist, ethnocentric, and capitalistic structure of the world that promotes elitist goals and concerns. The question, then, is not should freshman English be politicized, but whether or not to make the political assumptions overt and to have those assumptions discussed. When instructors

talk about depoliticizing the classroom, they are essentially saying to keep those political agendas hidden and to reproduce the hegemonic structure of American society.

Naturally, those who have blasted politically overt syllabi, such as the one proposed for EN 306, do not believe freshman English reproduces hegemonic practices, and certainly, depending on the method, it doesn't necessarily have to. Anything involving collaboration or student-centered teaching, for instance, is based on theories that conflict with the status quo of American society. However, as much as I like the principles on which these type of pedagogies are built, I still have to object to them for the same reason I object to more traditional classrooms: teaching becomes indoctrination unless the assumptions behind a discipline are exposed and discussed.

I am not here, though, to promote the dogmatic and hypocritical methods of those labeled "politically correct," methods which have focused nationwide attention on the constitutionality of our campus policies and which have again brought the left under attack. I think most detractors believe the politically correct method to be one in which the professor's viewpoint is right and that students must conform to certain beliefs or must express their thoughts in certain acceptable ways, or be punished in the form of grading. This method is not new, and whether coming from a conservative or radical position, is just plain bad pedagogy. I am in complete sympathy with what these radical pedagogues are attempting, though. They are fighting against the naturalized elements of racism, sexism, and capitalism, and are trying to give their students a different perspective on the global community, to open their eyes so to speak. I remember a few years back during a class discussion when a student named Nadine was talking about

salaries in connection with some point in her paper, and somehow, how much I made as a teacher came up. She was incredulous when I told her the paltry sum, wondering how I survived on such a low amount, and concluding that I must be lying. "After all," she said. "The average person makes over $100,000." Now, I'm sure there were better ways to question this assumption of hers, but I felt a little eye-opening was necessary, so I threw out a few facts, referred her to Davis and Parenti, and I'm sure was as dogmatic as the worst of the politically correct teachers in assuring her that very few people made over $100,000 a year. So, like I said, I sympathize with those teachers who have been labeled politically correct, having, out of frustration, fallen into the habit of forcing my opinion onto my students more than once.

But I'm bothered by the ethics of this type of teaching. Even the most self-evident facts need to be questioned, and the worst thing an instructor can do is to disguise an opinion as a fact. To follow up on Nadine and her beliefs, I pointed her towards Mike Davis and Michael Parenti, both of whom have published works that deal with the economic disparity in the world caused by capitalism. Davis will point out that 1/3 of the work force earns a wage just above the poverty line, and that the median wage for a white male was $17,000 a year while working women made considerably less (208). Parenti shows how the rich own practically everything and that the buying power for the average head-of-household is slipping even if his or her wages are rising (29). However, I could have just as easily suggested Nadine read *The World Almanac*, which paints a much rosier picture of average salaries in the United States. While slightly lower than Nadine's $100,000 estimate, it still shows the average worker at a very

comfortable $22,000 a year (137). Therefore, what I did was to distort the issue rather than to give her the tools to discover her misperception. Nadine was obviously wrong here, but when the situations become a little more sticky, giving students "facts" on such things as sexism or homosexuality is tantamount to indoctrinating them by the very same methods that have been used against them throughout their education. I've learned what I've learned by examining my experiences and investigating issues from several different perspectives, by challenging those authoritative voices in textbooks and behind podiums that sought to indoctrinate me into their truths. I do feel I have arrived at correct interpretations of quite a few politically charged social issues, and I would like to pass onto my students what I have learned, but I must allow my students the opportunity to acquire knowledge. My opinions are not facts and to act like they are in a classroom is simply unethical.

I'd like to propose an alternative to the self-righteousness of politically overt classrooms. I call this the Ethical Epistemic Approach to teaching composition. I feel it brings to the forefront in freshman English the assumptions behind the political issues that concern so many of us, while at the same time, not making those issues the focus or the content of the course. More importantly, it allows students to reach their own conclusions on volatile issues without being punished for disagreeing with the instructor. The Ethical Epistemic Approach is based on a few assumptions of its own that I discuss with my students: 1) that the discipline of composition is a study of written language use, 2) that content is more important than form in producing intelligent, interesting papers, and 3) that texts, any texts, even freshman essays, participate in and express the views of

the dominant cultural system.

The class is run as an ongoing writing workshop. I greet my students at the beginning of the semester with a brief introduction about process writing, and I outline the course for them. The first week is spent letting the students get to know me and I make my position as a critic of American society very clear. I assure them, though, that my opinions about Bush and feminism and ethnocentricity will not be criteria in their grading, nor will they be expected to write on these topics. Rather, I want to show them how certain positions on issues have been naturalized into our vocabulary and into our notion of logic through cliched conclusions (such as the "morals" to fairy tales, for instance), vague generalizations, rhetorical ploys, and research methodologies.

I don't try to hide my agenda. I tell my students that I think they will find that the ideologies of racism, sexism, and elitism (to name a few here) have been hidden in concepts familiar to them that are rarely questioned. I want my students to do that questioning, so I instruct them to look for incongruities in their writing--details that seem at odds with their generalization or with what they are feeling, different perspectives on the issue that seem to turn their lessons in life topsy-turvy, the words they can't find to explain themselves or the ones they've been told not to use, even a preponderance of passive voice constructions. Looking for these incongruities, I tell them, will bring their assumptions to the forefront of their writing, and at times, will challenge their stated beliefs, but that my job is to do no more than to challenge along these lines, on the basis of what's in their papers, not on what I think should be in it.

During this first week, I pass around essays I have written and conduct mock

workshops. These essays are in various stages of development, and I use new ones each semester, some of them using a persona, others of them being based on my actual experiences. I go through the "rules" of workshopping a paper, telling the students it is not a time to attack another writer nor to placate him or her, and demonstrate instances of both over-aggressiveness and over-niceness. Usually, the last paper I give them will need work as far as the craft of writing goes--unless a student sees an underlying assumption that I hadn't noticed--and this serves as an opportunity for them to discuss more traditional issues of writing classes such as sentence variety or organizing skills, just to let them know that all of writing isn't uncovering hidden assumptions, and that quite often, papers will be free of such problems.

I pass out the sign-up sheet for workshop days during this first week. In a class of 25, reviewing two essays during a fifty-minute class session, each student must bring in an essay three times during the semester to be discussed in the class, and they must bring copies of that essay for every student and must distribute the essays the session before it is to be read. Students then read the essays at home and come to class prepared to discuss them.

The students can write on whatever they choose, although I do suggest topics if students become stuck. I want to stress here that a paper does not have to address politically charged social issues for those issues to be discussed in class. Although some students choose to write about their observations concerning heated issues like abortion or Central America, topics such as friendship, love, football, or their jobs are often founded on assumptions that can lead a class towards discussions of sexist, racist, and

capitalist ideology. I only ask the students to include a personal experience or observation, to analyze that experience or observation, and to come to some conclusion that goes beyond them and their immediate circumstances.

The workshop begins in the second week. The class period usually starts with me pointing out positive parts in a student's essay, and then focusing on a cliche, such as "honesty is the best policy," or a use of language that seems to be vague or unexplored, adjectives such as "nice" or "interesting" or abstract political concepts like "democracy" or "pro-life." The traditional way of "correcting" poor word choices is just to tell the student to be more concrete in his or her revision of the paper, but the Ethical Epistemic Approach questions why the student chose the words or phrases in question and sees whether they really reflect what he or she wants to say. I then ask the students for their reactions to the paper, especially on the issue I pointed out, and if everything goes right, what usually emerges is that a very complex ideology has been hidden by a particular use of rhetoric. The best question for a teacher to ask to instigate this type of discussion is, "What do you mean here?"

As an example, a student named Max wrote an essay on capital punishment where he justified his beliefs by saying, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." I focused on this during the discussion, simply asking him a series of questions. "Do you mean that if someone knocks out your tooth, you have the right to do the same? Or are you really referring to the part of the quotation you left out, 'A life for a life'?" Max agreed that he meant the latter. So I asked, "Do you mean that if by accident, I run someone over, I should be killed also?" While mumbling something about drunk drivers being the

exception, he said no, that he meant if it was intentional. One of the other students asked, "What about war?" Max was starting to get flustered, but said that he obviously did not mean war. He was talking about murder. The other student persisted, bringing up war crimes, and Max said that the battlefield was too confusing a situation to apply capital punishment to in case of an unlawful killing. "You mean that you're confining your beliefs to people intentionally breaking the law in a premeditated fashion." He said yes. So I asked what about mercy killing, somebody mentioned conspirators, and another asked about insane people. This session concluded with some pointed political discussions, simply by me asking Max whether he would approve of gassing Lee Iacocca for his participation in the Pinto incident while he was at Ford, or about other white-collar criminals whose pre-meditated activities have caused deaths. Max said there was a difference, which brought to the surface elitist and possibly racist ideologies concerning crime and its victims. But as soon as we got to this point, as soon as Max realized that he had not analyzed these assumptions behind his opinion thoroughly enough, we stopped. The idea behind this discussion was not to make Max change his mind. It was simply to expose how inaccurate the expression "An eye for an eye" was in expressing his beliefs and to get him to think about his subject. And although the final product was not what I would call a well-presented, intelligent opinion, Max had rid his paper of the eye-for-an-eye cliche as well as other rhetorical ploys common to death penalty papers.

When research becomes an issue, I like to handle it by questioning the student's source. This assumes they have done some research, of course, which often times is not the case, but my example concerns someone who had. A student named Dan was upset

about the criticisms of the Malathion spraying in southern California to combat the Mediterranean fruit fly. Critics said that malathion is dangerous and to prove their point, poured some over a car. The malathion ate through the paint, so their conclusion was that anything that can eat through paint can't be good for you. Dan wrote about a group who conducted the same experiment but poured a can of Coke rather than malathion onto the car, and they got the same results. The paint job was ruined. Dan thought he'd proved the liberals wrong again. "You said a *can* of Coke," I said, "Does that mean that the original researchers poured that same amount of malathion onto the car?" Dan didn't know, but assumed that they had. "Was it the same type of car? Same type of paint job?" I asked. Dan said he had heard the report on television, but that he also had an article from a newspaper that he could check, but that he couldn't answer me just then. I said that was fine, and for him to check also who sponsored both experiments. The class then brought up issues of the purpose behind trying to negate the original experiment, what was it trying to cover up, and whether there were other, more reliable experiments to draw conclusions from. "Why do you think people suspect malathion is unhealthful?" I asked. He thought it was politics, the liberals trying to make Deukmejian look bad, but he agreed that his source was a little shaky. "Besides," a student named Robin said to Dan, "all your source is saying is that Coke is as bad for us as malathion." What she had done is take the same facts and reach a conclusion, and Dan saw this. I stopped the conversation here, though, as the idea behind the Ethical Epistemic Approach is not to beat the student into submission. I merely wanted him to see the way research can be manipulated, and how sources need to be scrutinized and

balanced off one another in order to reach a viable conclusion. Unfortunately, Dan's research was still slanted by the time he turned in his final draft, but he now had more information and was no longer relying on the slogans and what I'll call "pop" research in presenting his opinion.

For a final example of the Ethical Epistemic Approach in action, a student named Rod, a believer in non-violence, wrote an essay about how bad he felt striking a man who had goosed him when he had been hanging outside a record store in Hollywood. His conclusion, though, was that the guy deserved it. I asked Rod, "What do you mean he deserved it?" Rod said that the guy was making a pass at him and that not being gay, Rod was offended by it. "He's trying to impose his sexuality onto me," he said. I asked, "So you mean you would have hit him if he had come up, introduced himself, and asked you for your phone number or to go see a movie with him sometime." Rod said no, and somebody else in the class said it was the act of pinching that was wrong, that Rod could have easily said for the guy to scram if it had just been verbal. Rod said, yeah, that it was an inappropriate act, but that it was still an imposition of the other man's sexuality onto Rod. "So you mean," I asked, "that whenever one person approaches another for a date or to try to pick up or whatever, that it is an imposition." One of the guys said that only if it was a man coming onto a man was it wrong. I asked, "So it's okay, then, to do this type of imposing to a woman?" Both Rod and the other student agreed, but there was dissent in the class that took up quite a few minutes. I continued at the first lull in the conversation. "Do you mean it's okay for a man to goose a woman?" I asked. Rod didn't respond, and Valerie, one of the women, said that Rod's discomfort was the fact

that he had been treated like a woman and didn't like it. Although I suspected homophobia or that Rod didn't like the challenge to his own masculinity, I let the conversation take off from there and didn't bring up my suspicions. The purpose of the Ethical Epistemic Approach is not to impose my interpretation onto the student; it is to expose the issues covered up by language and to let the student explore them in writing. Rod's final draft used Valerie's notion, coming to the odd conclusion (considering his beliefs in non-violence) that it was okay for women to hit men who goose them, but the paper was noticeably longer than the original version, and more importantly, explored issues of gender roles in fairly complex language and syntax. His writing was clear, concrete, and analytical. Freeing Rod from his original vague conclusion didn't force him into my way of thinking, but rather led him towards modifying his own beliefs and towards expressing them in a mature, detailed fashion.

A criticism of the Ethical Epistemic Approach that I have heard is that I as the instructor am too much of a central participant in the classroom, but this isn't necessarily true. Usually after every student has submitted one essay and has undergone a critique, I become less important and do not have to say as much. The students have "caught on" so to speak, at least as respondents to papers, and will contribute more than I do in the class discussions. At this point, teachers can modify the Ethical Epistemic Approach and have the students work in small groups and possibly have the students churn out more writing or have them work on their revisions. But I personally like students to hear all the dialogue that goes on about preliminary drafts as I never know when something that has been said about one student's paper might help another student who is in the process

of composing.

Revisions of student text take place mostly in my office, unless the student wants to present the class the second or third draft of a piece, and most discussions of grammar and correct usage will be done there also. In fact, I have assigned handbooks in the past as a resource for students who are interested in studying standard written English. I don't make it a topic in my class, except in the first week where I discuss the ideologies behind "correct usage," but I will tutor students in my office who need help.

Grading can be handled any number of ways, but I use a modified portfolio system to encourage experimentation. Students need only submit one finished product--that is, one draft that has been revised to our mutual satisfaction--to pass the course. An "A" or a "B" is given when two or three of their essays are brought to finished products, and in all cases, preparation for and participation in class are counted significantly. At my current university, attendance policies are forbidden, but at schools where they are permitted, I like to include incentives for students to cut down on absences and tardiness.

I'm not pretending in this presentation that the Ethical Epistemic Approach is a perfect solution or that it will suit everyone's style of teaching. However, it can be implemented fairly easily, either by the individual teacher or by a composition director looking for a standardized policy for freshman English in his or her department. The Ethical Epistemic Approach does not increase the instructor's workload, and graduate students and first-time teachers can be trained in it effectively and efficiently as it does not take any specialized knowledge other than what they should already possess. It seeks

to achieve a balance between indoctrination and the pretense of depoliticization, and I think its results should satisfy both those who want political rigor in the classroom and those who want writing courses to teach the use of language in expressing ideas clearly.

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